**Minutes of the Regular Meeting**

**of the Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education**

**Tuesday, February 15, 2022**

**Department of Elementary and Secondary Education**

**75 Pleasant Street, Malden, MA 02148**

**9:02 a.m. – 11:06 a.m.**

**Members of the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education Present:**

**Katherine Craven**,Chair,Brookline

**James Morton**, Vice-Chair, Boston

**Amanda** **Fernández**,Belmont

**Matthew Hills**, Newton

**Eleni Carris Livingston**, Wellesley, Student Member

**Darlene Lombos,** Boston

**James Peyser**,Secretary of Education

**Mary Ann Stewart,** Lexington

**Martin West**, Newton

**Members of the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education Absent:**

**Michael Moriarty,** Holyoke

**Paymon Rouhanifard,** Brookline

**Jeffrey C. Riley**, Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education

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Chair Craven called the meeting to order at 9:02 a.m. and members introduced themselves. Chair Craven noted that today’s Board meeting, like all open meetings of the Board, is being recorded.

**Statements from the Public**

* **Ed Lambert,** Executive Director, Mass Business Alliance for Education, addressed the Board on Student Opportunity Act implementation and Item 3: Plans for 2022 Accountability Reporting
* **Keri Rodrigues,** President, The National Parents Union, addressed the Board on Item 3: Plans for 2022 Accountability Reporting

**Comments from the Chair**

Chair Craven noted the continuing concern about mental health issues affecting students and schools. She said she and Commissioner Riley have discussed work that is being done in this area and it could be a topic for a future meeting.

Chair Craven commented on the importance of civility in public discourse. She said the hearing that the Board held in New Bedford in December on the charter school proposal was rancorous, and while the charter school proposal is not on the agenda today, she wanted to express her concern about some of the behavior at that public hearing. Chair Craven invited Mr. Hills and Vice-Chair Morton, who also attended the December hearing, to comment.

Mr. Hills said it is one thing to protest and another to make personal attacks. He said while many people at the hearing spoke very genuinely and civilly, others engaged in personal attacks that are not good for the process or the community. Vice-Chair Morton said reasoned discourse, respect, and caring are essential, especially on controversial issues that come before this Board. He said Board members are called upon to listen to all sides of the issues and make the best decisions they can in the interest of the children of the Commonwealth. Vice-Chair Morton said the issue of healthy civil discourse is broader than the New Bedford hearing; it affects public life generally, and he hopes for better in the future.

Chair Craven thanked Governor Baker and Secretary Peyser for supporting an increase in funding for the Early College program, which she said is benefiting students and advancing equity across the Commonwealth.

**Comments from the Secretary**

Secretary Peyser said he shares the concerns that others raised about some of the conduct at the New Bedford charter school hearing, adding that the highly charged opposition campaign may have contributed to the withdrawal of the application. Secretary Peyser said this was a strong founding team with a strong proposal for a wall-to-wall early college program focused on STEM, which would benefit the south coast area of the state. The Secretary said he hopes the group will apply again.

Secretary Peyser presented highlights from the Governor’s FY23 education budget proposal. He said he believes there will be significant resources to address current needs and for long-term investments in improving K-12 education.

**Approval of Minutes**

**On a motion duly made and seconded, it was:**

**VOTED: that the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education approve the minutes of the January 25, 2022 Regular Meeting.**

The vote was unanimous.

Chair Craven noted that this meeting is being livestreamed and recorded.

**Update on Action Steps to Support Schools, Students, and Families – Discussion**

Commissioner Riley said after consulting with state health officials and medical advisors, last week he and Governor Baker announced a lift of the statewide school mask mandate as of February 28. He said the advance notice would allow time for school committees to decide on their local policies. Commissioner Riley added that all staff and students have the option to continue masking if they so choose, and he has spoken to superintendents about the importance of schools creating a supportive environment for all.

Mr. Hills asked about process if the Commissioner believes action on school masks is needed in the future based on another wave of infections. Commissioner Riley said he would expect to come back to the Board on any such action. The Commissioner updated the Board on the rollout of the new COVID-19 testing option for schools through at-home testing. He commented on the charter school discussion, noting that of two initial applications for new charters, the Department had invited the Innovators Charter School applicant group to submit a final application. He said prior to the Department completing the review process and before he had to decide on a recommendation to the Board, the group chose to withdraw their application, citing “political complexities.” Commissioner Riley said the applicant group is welcome to apply again next year.

Ms. Lombos commented that while she was not at the public hearing on the proposed charter school, the emails she received about it were respectful and raised legitimate concerns that were important to air. Ms. Lombos said she would like to have a better understanding of the charter school approval process and how the Board is expected to weigh the various factors.

Chair Craven said Commissioner Riley can provide information on the charter school process for all members before the next cycle. Vice-Chair Morton said Ms. Lombos made an important point about the many thoughtful comments that were submitted regarding the proposed charter school. He reiterated that the Board appreciates and encourages healthy discourse on these issues.

**Update on Competency Determination – Discussion**

Commissioner Riley opened the topic, noting the Education Reform Act of 1993 established the high school graduation standard called the Competency Determination (CD), which requires students to meet academic standards adopted by the Board and measured by the state assessment, MCAS, in order to be eligible for a Massachusetts high school diploma. He noted the Board has updated the CD standard at various points and in September 2021, the Board extended the interim passing standard through the class of 2025 because of delays and changes due to the pandemic.

Commissioner Riley said the pandemic also paused the work of the Competency Determination Advisory Committee that was set up in winter 2020. He said the committee reconvened in fall 2021 and has produced considerations for the Board and Commissioner as we move forward. Commissioner Riley introduced Rob Curtin, Chief Officer for Data, Assessment, and Accountability, Michol Stapel, Associate Commissioner, and Dr. Dana Mohler-Faria, Chair of the Competency Determination Advisory Committee, President Emeritus of Bridgewater State University, and former BESE member, to present information and engage in discussion with the Board.

Mr. Curtin presented an overview on the CD and the current interim standard for grade 10 mathematics and English language arts. He explained that the Commissioner is not making a recommendation today but providing background and an opportunity for discussion. Mr. Curtin reviewed the law that establishes the CD and discussed the historical timeline, including that the Board adopted an interim standard in 2018 and after the pandemic hit, voted to extend the interim standard through the class of 2025. Mr. Curtin said the next step will be for the Board to set a standard for students in the class of 2026 (this year’s eighth graders) and beyond.

Mr. Curtin reviewed the current CD requirements for English language arts, mathematics, and science and technology/engineering. He discussed the process for MCAS retests and appeals as well as additional pathways to the CD. Mr. Curtin noted that the Board has previously seen the data showing that students who score at the minimum current CD level are not well prepared for success in post-secondary education or in the labor market.

Dr. Mohler-Faria discussed the work of the Competency Determination Advisory Committee. He said the evidence presented to and discussed by the committee points to the need to raise the CD standard beyond the current legacy-equivalent cut scores. Dr. Mohler-Faria said the Commissioner and Board also need to focus on providing support and resources to students and communicating information clearly and broadly to students, parents, and educators. He thanked the committee members and the Secretary, Board, and Commissioner, noting that our future depends on the preparation of our students. Mr. Curtin thanked Dr. Mohler-Faria and the committee members for their commitment to this work. He concluded by reviewing the expected timeline for next steps.

Dr. West, who served on the committee as the Board representative, said there was consensus on at least three items: the skills measured by MCAS matter; students scoring at the minimum interim level are not well prepared; and parents and students assume that a high school diploma means the student is ready for college and career, which shows a disconnect on communication. Dr. West said these points underscore the need to raise the standard and improve communication, including on the appeals process. Chair Craven thanked Dr. West and Dr. Mohler-Faria for their work on the committee. Dr. Mohler-Faria, Dr. West, and Mr. Curtin responded to questions from Board members. Chair Craven concluded the discussion by stating it resonates particularly for her and other parents of current eighth graders, and it is vital to focus on the skills that students need to succeed.

**Plans for 2022 Accountability Reporting – Initial Discussion**

Commissioner Riley said during the pandemic, the U.S. Department of Education invited states to apply for waivers of certain federal accountability reporting requirements and Massachusetts has done so. He said the Department wants to make strategic use of the limited flexibility that has been provided to reset accountability reporting standards. Commissioner Riley said Mr. Curtin would describe the tentative plans.

Commissioner Riley said he could envision a new accountability measure that gives districts credit for effective approaches to early literacy, including using evidence-based high-quality curriculum materials, training teachers and administrators on the science of reading, and using approved diagnostic screeners. The Commissioner said this could supplement student performance measures. He said while this idea is still in the initial stages, he wanted to bring it up as something he might present to the Board for consideration in the future.

Secretary Peyser thanked the Commissioner for considering ways to promote evidence-based early literacy practices to prepare children for proficiency in reading and future academic success. He said incorporating these ideas into the accountability system is a creative approach; it could elevate the focus on effective practices as outlined in the Mass Literacy guidelines and also encourage greater attention to early identification and intervention with children who have reading disabilities. The Secretary said he looks forward to further discussions on this topic.

Mr. Curtin presented the plans for 2022 accountability reporting, including background information, current accountability requirements at the federal and state level, and the proposed plan, process, and timeline. He noted the U.S. Department of Education is not allowing waivers of student assessment for the 2022 school year, while still offering certain flexibilities relating to accountability reporting.

Mr. Curtin said the 2021 MCAS results reflect a limited assessment of student performance, while a full assessment this year would create a more solid baseline for a reset. He said the Department will continue to publish performance data whether or not it is used for accountability purposes. Noting the public comment earlier in the meeting, Mr. Curtin said the Department has given districts targets for them to use in their plans under the Student Opportunity Act, as required by state law, but could take a different approach in the accountability system. Chair Craven thanked Mr. Curtin, noting the Board will continue discussing this topic at future meetings.

**Education Budget Update – Discussion**

Mr. Hills gave the Board a brief summary of the February 1, 2022 meeting of the Budget Committee. He said the committee met with CFO Bill Bell and the DESE finance team, who presented information about the significant federal and state funding going to districts.

Mr. Bell noted that Secretary Peyser earlier today gave an overview of the Governor’s education budget proposal for FY23, which includes Student Opportunity Act funding, increases in district reimbursement for charter tuitions, an increase to circuit breaker reimbursement for special education costs, and continued investment in other education priorities. Mr. Bell said the joint Ways and Means Committee will hold a hearing on the education budget proposal on March 15.

Mr. Bell briefed the Board on the Department’s ongoing fiscal and programmatic operations relating to pandemic relief funding, including assistance to non-public schools through the EANS program, school nutrition aid from the US Department of Agriculture, and work with the approved special education programs and schools to support workforce retention and recruitment. He noted the Governor recently signed a supplemental budget law that provides additional funding for the Department to support schools and districts in acquiring more personal protective equipment and rapid antigen tests.

**On a motion duly made and seconded, it was:**

**VOTED: that the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education adjourn the meeting at**

**11:06 a.m., subject to the call of the Chair.**

The vote was unanimous.

Respectfully submitted,

Jeffrey C. Riley

Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education

and Secretary to the Board